REFUGEE STUDIES PROGRAMME

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

RESPONDING TO THE NUTRITION CRISIS AMONG REFUGEES: THE NEED FOR NEW APPROACHES

AFGHANS IN PAKISTAN, WHY RATIONS DECLINE

ABSTRACT

Although the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan, at 3.35 million, is extremely high, these refugees have been accorded relatively low priority by the international community. This is largely a reflection of the access to employment and trade which many of the refugees have had but it also has regard to the willingness of the Pakistan Government to meet the shortfall in food aid requirements and the welcome which it has extended to the refugees. There has also been some doubt about whether the numbers have been as great as stated. Because donors have not considered the Afghan refugees to be in a desperate situation, the pattern of food aid provision has been very erratic, following fluctuating priorities in humanitarian aid and, to an extent, political developments. Apart from the initial period, it has demonstrated no apparent relationship to the number of refugees in existence. The donations from the U.S.A. can be singled out as bearing an almost exclusive relationship to American foreign policy on Afghanistan. The international community is now working towards a gradual withdrawal of its support through a policy of repatriation, combined with an integration programme for those who wish to settle in Pakistan and a targeting element for vulnerable groups. There are dangers to this approach. There are many obstacles to repatriation. Permanent settlement in Pakistan is hindered by the increasing pressures which the economy is facing. The risk of violence as refugees respond to their lack of security is ever present. The overriding impression is that the international community is endeavouring to absolve itself of a responsibility which the Pakistan Government dare not shirk. However, even if the international community were disposed to increase its commitment, declining food surpluses in donor countries and increasing demands for food aid elsewhere in the world, significantly limit its ability to do so.

NOTE: Since this paper was written, the U.S. Government has given a further food aid donation, to the level that it was in 1990, to meet the 1991 requirements for the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Its donation now constitutes 30% of the 1986 peak rather than 7% as stated. This does not alter the basic argument that its level of provision has been very closely related to political factors.

AFGHANS IN PAKISTAN, WHY RATIONS DECLINE

Introduction

The example of the Afghan refugee population has been used for this seminar because of what would appear to be a clear relationship between declining political interest in Afghanistan and declining rations for the Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

In this paper I shall endeavour to assess to what extent political factors have determined the rise and fall of ration levels for the Afghan refugees but I shall also consider the other factors which have had an influence.

It may be useful, first of all, to look at why the refugees are in Pakistan at all.

The exodus

Afghanistan has been engaged in a struggle between traditional values and "modernism" since the early part of this century. Until the 1950s the struggle was a very low key one.

As in many other parts of the world, the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of new political movements challenging the status quo. Two, in particular, were significant. One was a socialist movement, supported by the Soviet Union, which had long had strategic interests in Afghanistan. The other was an Islamist movement, similar to the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt, which was seeking to create a political ideology based on Islam.

In order to avert the repression of their movement by the government of the day the socialist parties united under the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan and staged a successful coup in April 1978. The early leadership sought to introduce reforms at a pace and with methods which provoked a massive backlash from the population at large. The Soviet Union, fearing a loss of its influence, entered Afghanistan in December 1979 with 30,000 troops. Their arrival coincided with the assassination of the then President and his replacement by a nominee of the Soviet Government. The Soviet troops remained until February 1989. During the ten years of occupation there was widespread destruction of villages, the killing of an estimated one million people and the maiming of very large numbers of people through mines and other war injuries.

The departure of the Soviet troops did not lead to peace. The key elements of the struggle which had preceded their entry still persisted. The Mujahidin remained committed to the overthrow of the Soviet-backed government and the Soviet Union continued to back its protege with ample supplies of arms to withstand the Mujahidin attacks. The situation now is one of continued small-scale conflict in which neither side is gaining the ascendancy. Political fragmentation presents an increasing problem to those endeavouring to assist in the economic recovery of the country. This, combined with economic uncertainty and the presence of

mines, serves as a major deterrent to refugee return.

Refugees started to leave Afghanistan soon after the 1978 coup. By October 1979, before the Soviet occupation, there were already some 200,000 Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The arrival of Soviet troops accelerated the exodus. By 1980 there were 1,150,000 refugees. This number rose to 2,200,000 by 1982. Since then it has gradually increased to the point where there are now an estimated 3.35m registered refugees and an unknown but significant number of unregistered refugees.

The situation of the refugees

The refugees are housed in what are termed villages, but which are really townships, the length of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most of the refugees have replaced the tents with which they were originally provided with mud dwellings of their own construction. Each refugee village has one or more health centres, piped water supply and schools and many also have bazaars, training centres and income-generation projects.

In spite of their huge numbers, the refugees have been made relatively welcome in Pakistan, in part due to the common tribal origin of the majority of the refugees, who are Pushtun, and the people who live in the area where most of the refugees have settled. This welcome has extended to the refugees being permitted to trade freely and seek employment.

The refugees currently receive a wheat ration of 400 grammes per head per day and 20 grammes of edible oil, in addition to a supply of kerosene for cooking. This represents a reduction, dating from 1st January 1991, from 500 grammes of wheat and 30 grammes of edible oil. The kerosene ration has not changed, although the actual supply of kerosene has been hindered by the Gulf war.

In the early years of the refugee influx, they also received dried skimmed milk, tea and sugar but this has been withdrawn because of improvements in the general nutritional status. Dried skimmed milk continues to be used on a limited basis for supplementary feeding programmes.

However, because of insufficient controls in the distribution system, there have been considerable variations in the amounts which individual families have received. A minority of families have therefore suffered significant hardship.

The rations are provided by the World Food Programme with supplies given by the richer nations. These are supplemented by additional rations provided by the Government of Pakistan. Temporary shortfalls in supply have been met from borrowings from Pakistan Government reserves.

Very many of the refugee villages have reasonably easy access to major urban centres where refugees can seek to earn an income with which to supplement their rations.

To be entitled to rations refugees need to be registered with the Pakistan Government. However, the registration process stopped completely in North West Frontier Province in 1986 and has virtually ceased elsewhere. Those who have left Afghanistan since then have therefore had to fend for themselves, usually after an initial period of dependence on relief agencies. The exception to this is a group of 80,000 refugees who left in 1989 after heavy fighting in one area of Afghanistan. For these, UNHCR and the Pakistan Government have finally accepted responsibility since the beginning of 1991 after over a year of extremely precarious food provision from various sources.

It has always been difficult to assess the number of refugees with any degree of accuracy. Apart from the inevitable tendency of vested interests to inflate the figures and obstruct enumeration exercises, there are additional factors which complicate the process. For example, some refugees move from camp to camp because of the heat or to see relatives, thus leading to double registration in some instances. Also, refugees have always moved in and out of Afghanistan, either to fight in the jihad or to keep their land under cultivation in their areas of origin. Further, the registration process was a one-off undertaking. The numbers quoted therefore take no account of subsequent births and deaths.

This level of uncertainty has led donors to assume that the number is probably appreciably less than stated, and, combined with the availability of work for a large proportion of the refugees, has led them to be relatively relaxed about the adequacy of rations for the Afghan refugees in Pakistan as compared with those for refugees in other parts of the world, particularly Africa.

<u>The level of ration provision</u>

The overall level of provision has shown considerable fluctuation over the ten years of the refugee presence. Disregarding the initial build up, provision has varied between a high of 482,500 metric tonnes and a low of 335,494 metric tonnes (only 70% of the upper limit). Provision for 1990 was 410,322 metric tonnes.

There is no apparent relationship between these tonnages and the number of refugees registered.

Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, very little research has been done on documentation held by donors to establish the factors which have led to these fluctuations. In the absence of such research, one can only speculate about what these factors might be.

Humanitarian need considerations are clearly an important factor in determining the generosity of donor nations.

However, the foreign policy of donor nations would appear to be an additional factor of significance. In order to test this out it might be of interest to relate fluctuations in donor provision

a decrease.

In 1986, the peak year for U.S. provision, when there was also increased provision from Japan, the E.E.C. and Germany, there was decreased provision from France and Canada.

In 1987, when US provision slumped, Japanese, E.E.C., Canadian and French provision increased.

In 1988 only Canada increased its provision. The rest remained static or declined. By then, in February 1988, Gorbachev had announced that Soviet troops would start leaving on 15th May and complete withdrawal within ten months.

In 1989, drops in provision from Japan, the E.E.C. and Canada and a static situation as far as U.S. provision was concerned were countered by increases from France and Germany. The decreases in provision can be related to an expectation by donors that the refugees would return following the withdrawal of Soviet troops on February 15th of that year.

In 1990, substantial decreases in aid from the U.S.A., Japan and France were offset by increases from the E.E.C., Canada, Australia and Germany. One may speculate that the decreases reflected declining political interest in Afghanistan while the increases might be a result of UN appeals for humanitarian assistance.

The pattern of total provision has been less erratic. After the 1982 peak and subsequent slump the supply achieved an even higher peak in 1986 and 1987, since when it has continued to decline.

However, if one looks at the pattern of funding by the E.E.C. and European donors as a whole, it has been extremely erratic. It peaked in 1982, slumped in 1983, peaked again in 1984, slumped even further in 1985, rose during 1986 and 1987 to achieve the highest peak ever in 1987 and slumped again in 1988, since when it has continued to rise.

It is therefore necessary to look at what factors could have caused this erratic pattern.

Humanitarian considerations would appear to have played a significant role.

This has meant that donors have continually balanced the needs of the refugees in Afghanistan against other humanitarian needs elsewhere in the world. e.g. the Horn of Africa.

It is important to note that food aid provision through the World Food Programme to date has taken the form of a succession of short-term emergency donations covering a few months at a time. It was only last year that a budget was created to cover what are termed protracted feeding operations to provide for situations such as that of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Provision has therefore been very susceptible to changing priorities within donor governments, exacerbated by a tendency for donors to earmark their contributions for particular countries.

The erratic nature of provision may also have been due to the relatively relaxed attitude of donors in relation to the needs of the Afghan refugees because of the relative advantages which these have compared with those affected by food shortage elsewhere in the world. First, as indicated above, the Afghan refugees have access to income-earning opportunities. Second, because the Government of Pakistan has always supplemented the rations provided by the World Food Programme, the refugees have not suffered from malnourishment. The main exception to this has been newly arrived refugees who have needed special programmes to sustain them pending more permanent arrangements.

In considering these factors, the scepticism of donors about whether the number of refugees in existence corresponds to that stated leads them to give even less weight to their needs than they might otherwise have done.

This view that the refugees are not wholly dependent on the rations made it possible, for example, for dried skimmed milk to be withdrawn as a universal provision a few years ago, after surveys had indicated that, under the conditions in which it was used, it created a risk to health. It has also been possible for tea and sugar to be withdrawn. Similarly, a cash allowance provided by the Government of Pakistan was gradually withdrawn after the initial period.

However, it is the access of refugees to outside sources of income which has been the dominant factor in making donors feel that the needs of Afghan refugees are perhaps less than others elsewhere in the world who are seeking food aid. This has been a major factor in the recent decision to reduce the individual ration in 1991.

The point has now been reached where the UN is clearly embarking on a process of withdrawal of assistance. The UN High Commissioner, during a visit to Pakistan in March 1990, indicated that refugees should not continue to expect that the international community would maintain them. The UNHCR now considers that, while it should put every effort into supporting any repatriation process, it has to accept that a proportion of the refugees may choose to remain in Pakistan because of the greater access to income-earning opportunities. It has already reduced expenditure on facilities in the refugee camps and this, combined with the reduction in food aid, can be seen as the beginning of the process of withdrawal. The impact of this may be softened by programmes aimed at vulnerable groups within the refugee population, until such time as these can return to Afghanistan or become self-sufficient. The rate of withdrawal will depend on developments and will be subject to negotiation with the Pakistan Government. Similarly, the establishment of programmes for the integration of those who choose to remain in Pakistan and for the continued maintenance of vulnerable groups will be the subject of discussion with the Government.

The recent earthquake and severe flooding in Afghanistan, in early February, will have further complicated the situation by reducing the likelehood of early repatriation and making a further exodus possible.

An important factor in this situation is the ability of the donor nations to leave the burden of ultimate responsibility for the withdrawal of support on the Pakistan Government, because of the supplementary support which it has provided.

To date, it would appear that the Pakistan Government has continued to top up the rations provided by outside donors. This is confirmed by regular nutrition surveys carried out by the UN which indicate that nutrition levels have been maintained. However, some NGOs working in camps dispute this.

Whether or not they have, an announcement made in March 1990 by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan that the UN would be assisting refugees to return this year to areas which were relatively free of fighting, termed "zones of tranquillity", combined with the statement by the UN High Commissioner referred to above has made the refugees increasingly nervous. This has led to growing violence in the camps. To quote from a recent statement by the Pakistan Home Secretary "It would be appreciated that the increase in population on the one hand and the decline in quantum of the assistance on the other, have induced a sense of frustration in the refugees. Such frustration ultimately surfaces in acts of violence in and outside the camps."

Certainly, the Pakistan government has reason to fear the risk of violence if rations were to be withdrawn and fear may be a factor, along with the commitment to support the Afghans in their struggle, which leads the Government of Pakistan to continue to supplement the rations. A withdrawal of rations from the donor nations may therefore have no impact on the refugees but it could have serious consequences for the Pakistan government, seeking to deal with unrest in Sind, and the possibility of war over Kashmir and needing to find the resources to meet these and many other responsibilities.

However, even if international donors were disposed to reverse their current food aid policy in relation to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, their ability to provide increased food aid is very much in question. North America and Europe no longer produce the huge food surpluses on which many countries have become dependent. The number of situations where food aid is potentially needed are increasing. Donor nations are tending to see food aid as an integral part of their aid budgets rather than a supplementary element and, as such, are scrutinising it in the context of budget economies. Food aid as a mechanism for the provision of aid is becoming increasingly questioned because of the many potentially negative factors arising from its use.

The future is therefore a very uncertain one. One has to assume that a sizeable number of Afghan refugees will remain in Pakistan for the next few years, even if there is a reasonable rate of return. It is clear that donor provision overall will show a continued decline. In view of the commitment of the Pakistan government to meet the shortfall, the end result may be increasing strain on the resources of the Pakistan government and growing instability within Pakistan as the anxieties of refugees regarding their future increase. The abundance of arms within the refugee population makes such a scenario a very worrying one.

Conclusion

The pattern of food aid provision for the Afghan refugees in Pakistan has borne only a minimal relationship to refugee numbers. Humanitarian need considerations have been important determinants in relation to the provision in any one year and, because of competing demands from other parts of the world, has led to significant fluctuations in provision. There would appear to be some relationship between the foreign policy of donor nations and the level of provision, particularly in the case of the U.S.A. However, the priority accorded to Afghan refugees has also been influenced by the relatively easy access which most have to income-earning opportunities and by donor scepticism about the numbers involved. Current UN policy favours a gradual withdrawal of support from the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, linked with the continued repatriation programme, and based on negotiations with the Pakistan Government for the integration of those who choose to remain permanently in Pakistan and for the provision of ongoing support to vulnerable groups.

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